Edison, A Biography. By MATTHEW JOSEPHSON. (McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1959. Pp. xii, 511. $6.95.)

Among the giants in American folklore are two tycoons, Henry Ford and Thomas Edison. Other tycoons may have their places in American mythology, but these two have become supreme examples of the great national belief that any boy can become a millionaire—to unnumbered millions of our people a more important belief than any American boy can become President. The process by which a mortal man becomes a semi-mythical man-god is complex, but it includes two essential factors. One is outstanding success in the man's chosen field of endeavor, be it banditry or invention. The other is possession of the trait known as the common touch, earthiness, or whatever you choose to call that mole of complexion which enables Everyman to identify himself with his chosen ideal. Of this characteristic both Ford and Edison possessed a full measure. Not unnaturally, the lives of both have attracted numerous biographers, the latest being Matthew Josephson.

A biographer usually approaches his quarry with one of three intentions: to glorify his hero, flay his villain, or present a straightforward account of a man's life. Frequently, the latter objective may be coupled with one of the other two, and this is the case of Josephson. Edison, he tells us, is a "latter day Prometheus" who, in an age dominated by the spirit of acquisitiveness, typified the "Spirit of Workmanship." But it is not just worship of Edison which brought Josephson to write this

book; in the thirty years since Edison's death much new evidence about him has accumulated. Seeing no useful purpose in preserving the apocrypha and false legends that have grown up around Edison's memory, Josephson has set out to remove the "veils of myth," but to leave Edison's "true stature undiminished."

Josephson is a craftsman, but he has set himself a task that demands more than craftsmanship. To write such a biography as he proposes calls for great artistry, and a deep understanding of the spiritual subtleties within the subject. These qualities are not apparent, and the book lacks the powerful sweep of Allan Nevins' biography of Ford or the majestic grace of Catherine Bowen's *Yankee from Olympus*.

As a result of relying solely on his craftsmanship Josephson has given us a two-sided portrait of his subject. Edison the inventor, passionately devoted to his work, and Edison the businessman, a tycoon in spite of himself, are clearly developed images. The third dimension of Edison is blurred and distorted. Edison as a man never quite comes through, although there are brief glimpses—as in the incident of the trick cigars—of the person behind the veils of fact. Unfortunately, for this illumination of spirit we must still go to the apocrypha and false legends. It is unfortunate, because this is a good book. It is a vast collection of facts about the life and work of Edison. (How many persons, for example, know that he invented that indispensable weapon of modern bureaucracies, the Mimeograph?) Nor has Josephson let admiration for his hero blind himself to Edison's shortcomings, although some of them are qualified by rationalization. For those whose interest in business history and biography is less than scholarly this is an excellent work. The story of Edison and his works is fully told, unobscured by pedantic minutiae. His early life is given a much fuller treatment than in any other biography, and, oddly, it is in this part of the book that we get the clearest view of the Edison personality. To repeat, it is a good biography. With a clearer view of the spirit of Edison it would have been a great one.

JOHN C. COLSON
University of Chicago